

CENTRAL ASIA

Human Rights Concerns in
Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan

Research Unit

USCIS Refugee, Asylum and International Operations

February 2021





R U S S I A

K A Z A K H S T A N

U Z B E K I S T A N

T U R K M E N I S T A N

K Y R G Y Z S T A N

T A J I K I S T A N

I R A N

A F G H A N I S T A N

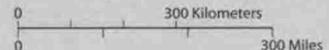
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C H I N A

I N D I A

Scale 1:17,000,000

Lambert Conformal Conic Projection,
standard parallels 50 N and 40 N



Boundary representation is
not necessarily authoritative.

Historical Context

- History as a crossroads
- “The Great Game” (Russia vs. Britain)
- Post-Soviet independence, regional instability, shifting regimes
- Modern struggle for influence (Russia, US, China)
- Central Asian countries leveraging major powers for strategic advantage



Route de la Soie

Route de la Soie

0 400 km



KAZAKHSTAN

OUZBÉKISTAN

KYRGYZSTAN

TURKMÉNISTAN

TADJIKISTAN

AFGHANISTAN

CHIN

MER CASPIENNE

MER d'Aral

AZERBAÏDJAN

ARMÉNIE

IRAN

IRAQ

KAZAKHSTAN

OUZBÉKISTAN

KYRGYZSTAN

TURKMÉNISTAN

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AFGHANISTAN

CHIN

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MER d'Aral

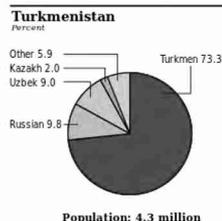
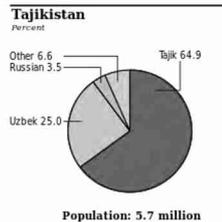
AZERBAÏDJAN

ARMÉNIE

IRAN

IRAQ

Major Ethnic Groups in Central Asia



Relationships to Russia

- Post-Soviet countries
- Russians and ethnic-Russians present (Russian language)
- Courting Russia as partner vs US and China
- Echoing Russian law; “Gay Propaganda” Laws?
- Dissent characterized as “foreign” (NGOs, unwanted religious practices, LGBTI)
- History of controlling religion

Regional Human Rights Concerns

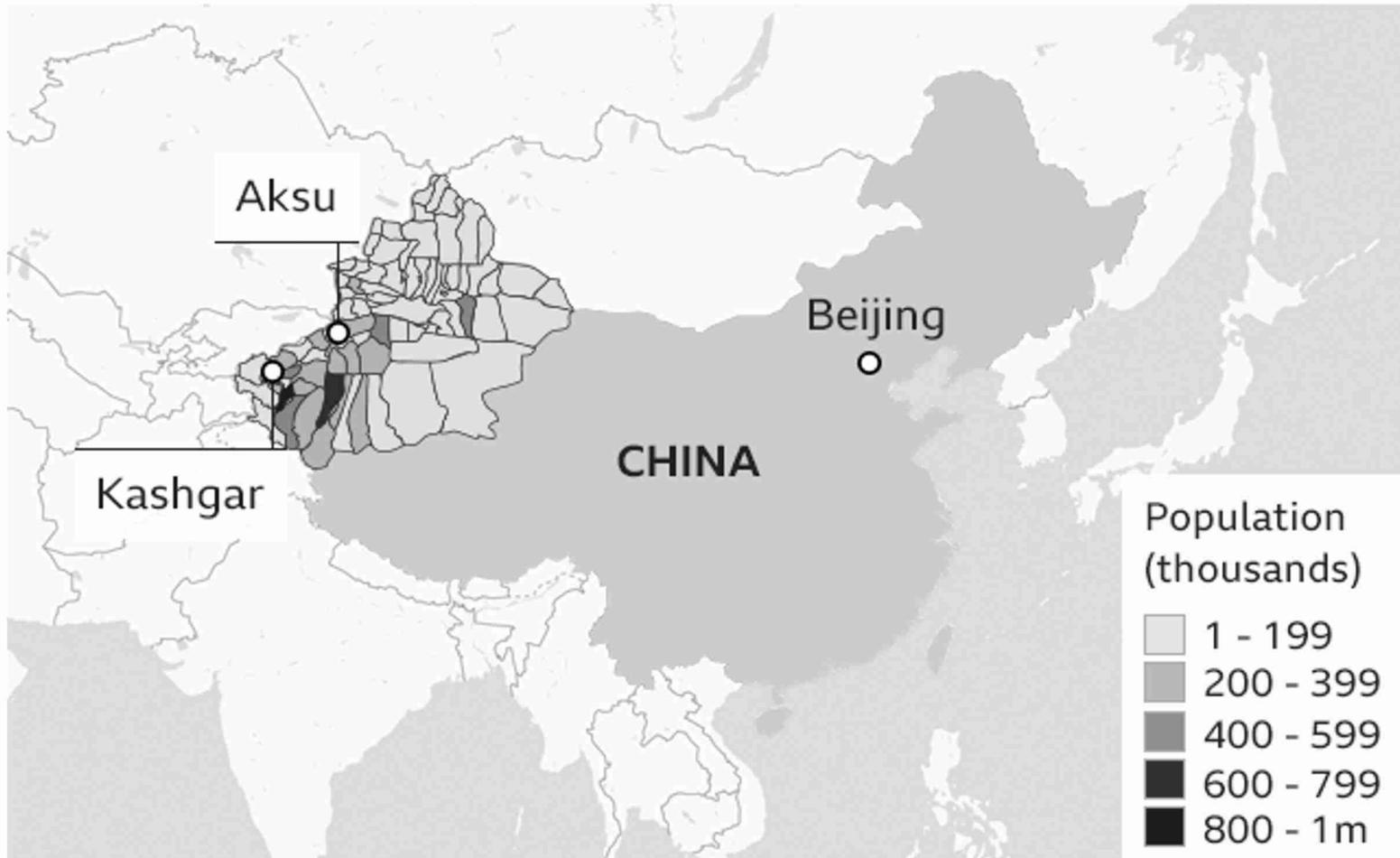


Importation of Surveillance from China



Importation of Surveillance from China

Uighur population in Xinjiang



Source: Xinjiang government

Importation of Surveillance from China



Importation of Surveillance from China



Importation of Surveillance from China

- China: effort to build global governance, counter Russia, US, EU
- Surveillance systems, facial recognition given (Kyrgyzstan; Tajikistan) – catch speeders, safer cities, generate revenue for police
- Data processed by companies intertwined with Chinese government
- China surveillance of own citizens (Uighurs) is serious concern; social control, oppression, genocide: “apply the ideas of military cyber systems to civilian public security”
- Uighur population in Kyrgyzstan; cross-border
- Authoritarianism easier (protestors arrested before reach protest)

Regional: COVID-19





КУРМАНГАЗЫ  ПУШКИНА

ТЕМАТИЧЕСКИЙ КЛУБ "СТУДИЯ 69"

ИНФОРМАЦИЯ И ЗАКАЗ СТОЛКОВ ПО ТЕЛ. 8 701 418 78 06, 8 705 555 22 69

Regional: LGBTI

- Pervasive homophobic attitudes, hateful treatment (public and private spaces)
- Acerbic anti-gay rhetoric from members of government
- Attempts to impose Russia-inspired “Gay Propaganda” laws
- Failure of police and other government agencies to protect from violence and discrimination
- LGBTI persons adjust their daily lives to avoid harm or exposure, curtailing their movement and silencing themselves for safety

Regional: LGBTI

- **Kyrgyzstan**: Anti-LGBTI rhetoric in Parliament (LGBTI people should be “not just cursed, but beaten”); LGBTI events targeted by nationalist groups (Kryk Choro) who threaten and film them, and throw eggs/paint, without police response; 300% increase in attacks after “gay propaganda” law introduced; police pose on Grindr, arrange dates, then extort
- **Uzbekistan**: Consensual sexual relationships between men criminalized (1-3 year sentence); hate crimes and police abuse common, including beatings and torture of men perceived as gay, posted online; blackmail, extortion, coerced collaboration; Istanbul-based activist’s family visited by police and threatened

Regional: LGBTI

- **Tajikistan**: Ombudsman for Human Rights stated Tajikistan could not uphold the rights of LGBTI people because they were “contrary to the moral and ethical norms of relationships...”; Law enforcement officials routinely target LGBTI people with intimidation, beatings, arbitrary arrests and extortion; beatings abroad by Tajiks
- **Kazakhstan**: Routine harassment, discrimination, threat of violence; Kazakh Constitutional Chamber nullified a Russia-style “gay propaganda” law; Supreme Court awarded two women compensation when a man filmed them kissing, posted on Facebook for shaming

Regional: Bride Kidnapping

- Kyrgyzstan: Pervasive (15-75%) – in all parts of the country; typically young women or minors; deception/violence/rape; lack of government assistance because “Kyrgyz tradition”
- Kazakhstan: In some remote areas; prohibited by law with long sentence; rare action on complaints
- Tajikistan: Ethnic Kyrgyz; (2011) reports of ethnic Tajik neighbors in the north-eastern Jyrgatal district copying
- Uzbekistan: Some reports among Karakalpaks, an ethnic group with an “autonomous republic” in the north/west deserts

Kyrgyzstan





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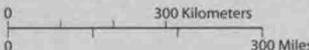
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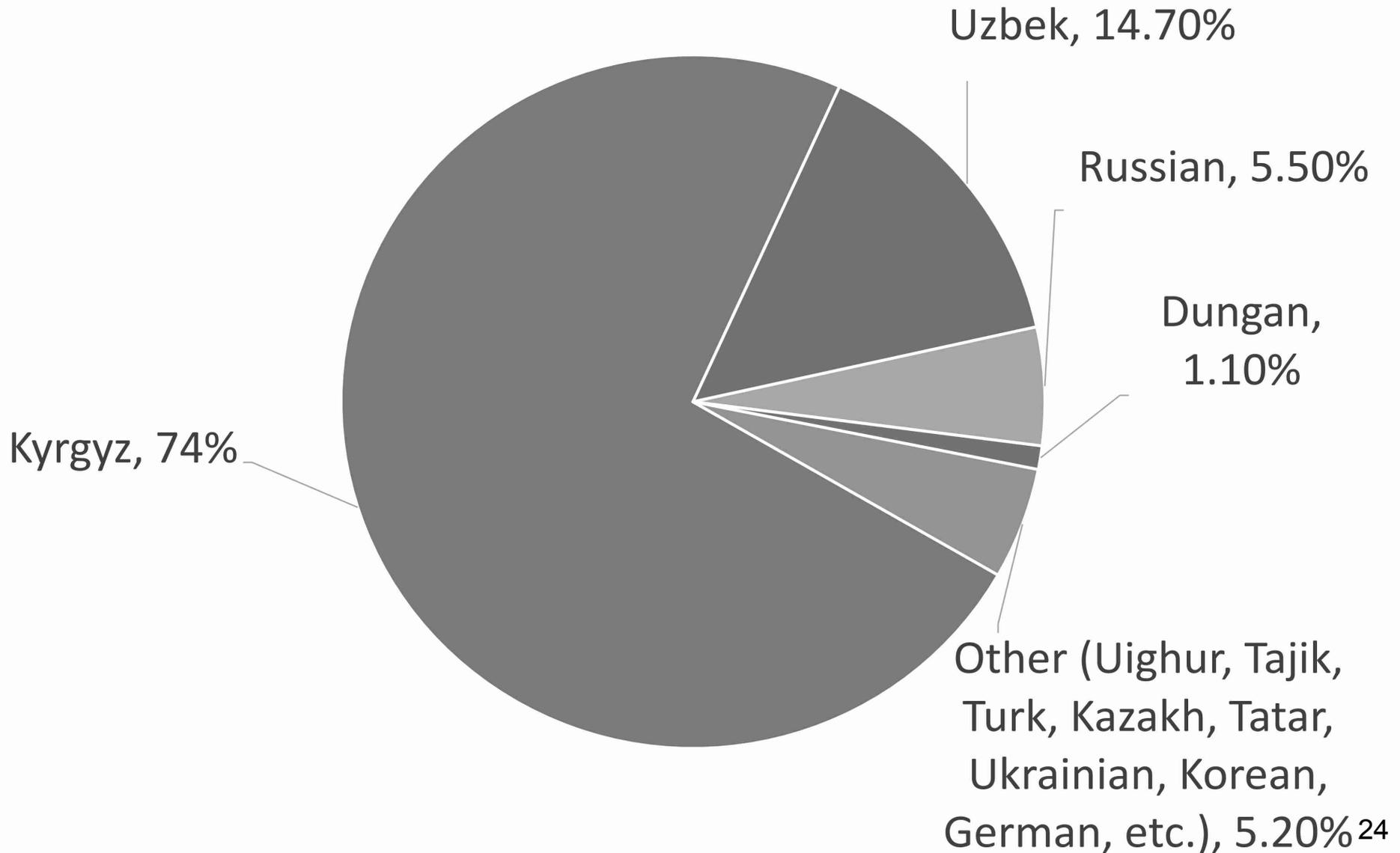


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Kyrgyzstan

- Capital: Bishkek
- Population: ~5.4 million
- Major languages: Kyrgyz, Russian
- Major religions: Primarily Islam, some Christianity
- Resentment at widespread poverty and ethnic divisions between north and south led to violence (Osh; ethnic-Uzbeks)
- Political shifts in recent years: President Jeenbekov stepped down October 2020 after unrest over Parliamentary elections (annulled); now President Japarov
- Had closer relationship with U.S., base for Afghanistan operations, but turned pro-Russia, now China

Ethnic Groups in Kyrgyzstan



Kyrgyzstan

Human Rights Concerns in RAIO Cases:

- Anti-government political claims
- Religion: treatment of Christians; Muslim “extremists”



Kyrgyzstan Political Dissent

- Civil society groups face pressure (May 2019, Coalition Against Torture meeting broken up by men with cameras, “patriotic youth movement”)
- Human Rights defenders detained:
 - Azimjon Askarov (Ethnic-Uzbek, life sentence for “murdering a police officer” during 2010 violence, died); Kamil Ruziev (head of Ventus, well-known for anti-torture, DV work, complaint against GKNB)
- Deputy Minister of the State Committee for National Security (GKNB) targeting international financing of NGOs (like Russia)
- Defamation lawsuits a tool for politicians to silence media outlets

Kyrgyzstan Political Dissent

Statutes with overly broad definitions of “incitement” and “extremism” used against dissent:

(Two with posters condemning Putin accused of “inciting national enmity”; teacher charged with “inciting interethnic discord” for anti-Russian comments on Facebook; blogger held for “inter-regional incitement” for posts about government figures)

- Journalists targeted, including in October 2020
- Torture widespread; impunity

Kyrgyzstan Religion



Kyrgyzstan Religion

- State Commission on Religious Affairs (SCRA) permission required
- Muslim Board and Russian Orthodox Church favored and controlled
- Change of policy in 2019: many religious communities given state registration (permission to exist) - various Christian churches, Baha'i communities, Falun Gong, and some Jehovah's Witness communities
- Refusal to register Ahmadi Muslims
- Ban on "door-to-door proselytizing"
- Raids on some religious communities; investigations, violations of detainees' rights
- State censorship; "extremists" literature
- Arbitrary expulsions of foreigners

Kyrgyzstan Religion

- Harassment, mob violence against non-Muslims and those friendly with them (church arson, burials)
- Underreporting because victims fear reprisals, threatened (lawyer of Protestant victim threatened with prosecution for "Incitement of national, racial, or religious hatred", possible 8-year sentence)
- DOS: "Incidents of harassment of minority religious groups typically occurred in small towns and villages with majority Kyrgyz populations", yet Bishkek authorities support attackers

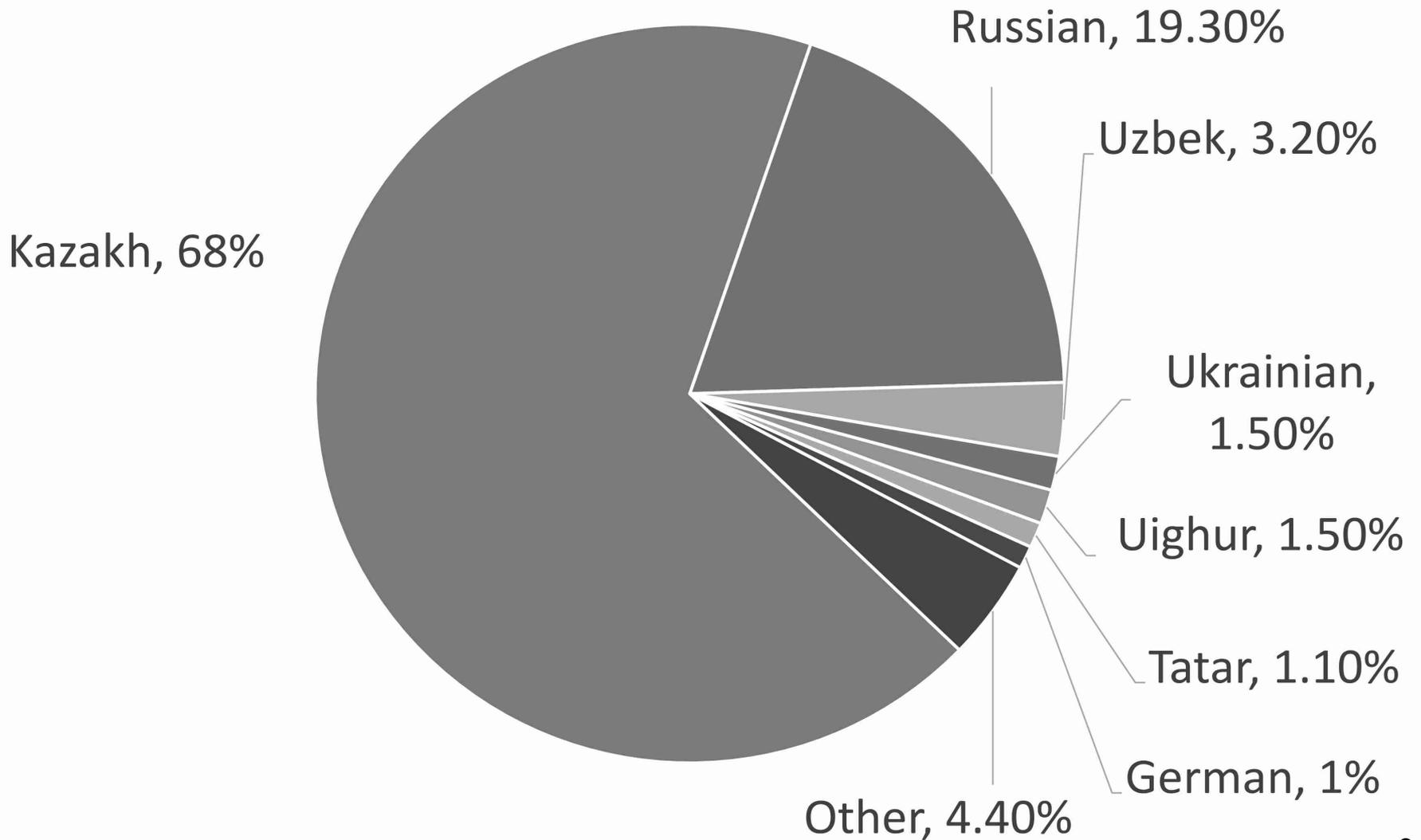
Kazakhstan



Kazakhstan

- Capital: Nur-Sultan (was named Astana)
- Population: ~18 million
- Major Languages: Kazakh, Russian
- Vast mineral resources and enormous economic potential (e.g. Kazatomprom)
- Main religion is Islam, but also Christianity

Ethnic Groups in Kazakhstan



Kazakhstan

Human Rights Concerns in RAIO Cases:

- Political opinion (anti-government claims, Alga, Azat, corruption)
- Organized crime
- Ethnicity



Kazakhstan

Leadership:

- President Nazarbayev: April 1990 – March 2019
- President Tokayev: March 20, 2019 – present
- Protestors arrested after Tokayev sworn in



Left: Nursultan Nazarbayev
Right: Kassym-Jomart Tokayev

Kazakhstan: Political Opinion

- Parties in opposition to the governing Nur Otan party declared extremist or prevented from registering: Koshe (Street) Party, Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan (DVK; DCK), Democratic Party of Kazakhstan (DPK), Alga, Azat
- Vague and overbroad charge of “extremism” and “inciting social, national, clan, racial, class, or religious discord”
- Most peaceful protestors detained
- Journalists attacked, charged with spreading false information, defamation, incitement
- Torture in custody

Kazakhstan: Corruption



Mukhtar Ablyazov

- “Corruption is endemic” and “the state bodies that are responsible for corruption are ineffective, unreliable, and fail to hold high-level officials responsible for corruption, abuses of office, and conflicts of interest” –GAN Integrity, 2016
- There were “significant acts of corruption” and the “government selectively prosecuted officials who committed abuses, especially in high-profile corruption cases. Nonetheless, corruption remained widespread.” - DOS Human Rights Report, 2019
- 15 political prisoners in Kazakhstan at the end of 2019

Kazakhstan: Organized Crime

- Grew in the 1990s
 - Weak government
- Criminal violence decreased after 1990s
- Criminal groups appear more legitimate now
 - Racketeering, extortion, etc.
 - Drug smuggling
 - Infiltrated government

Tajikistan





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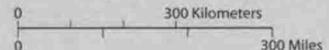
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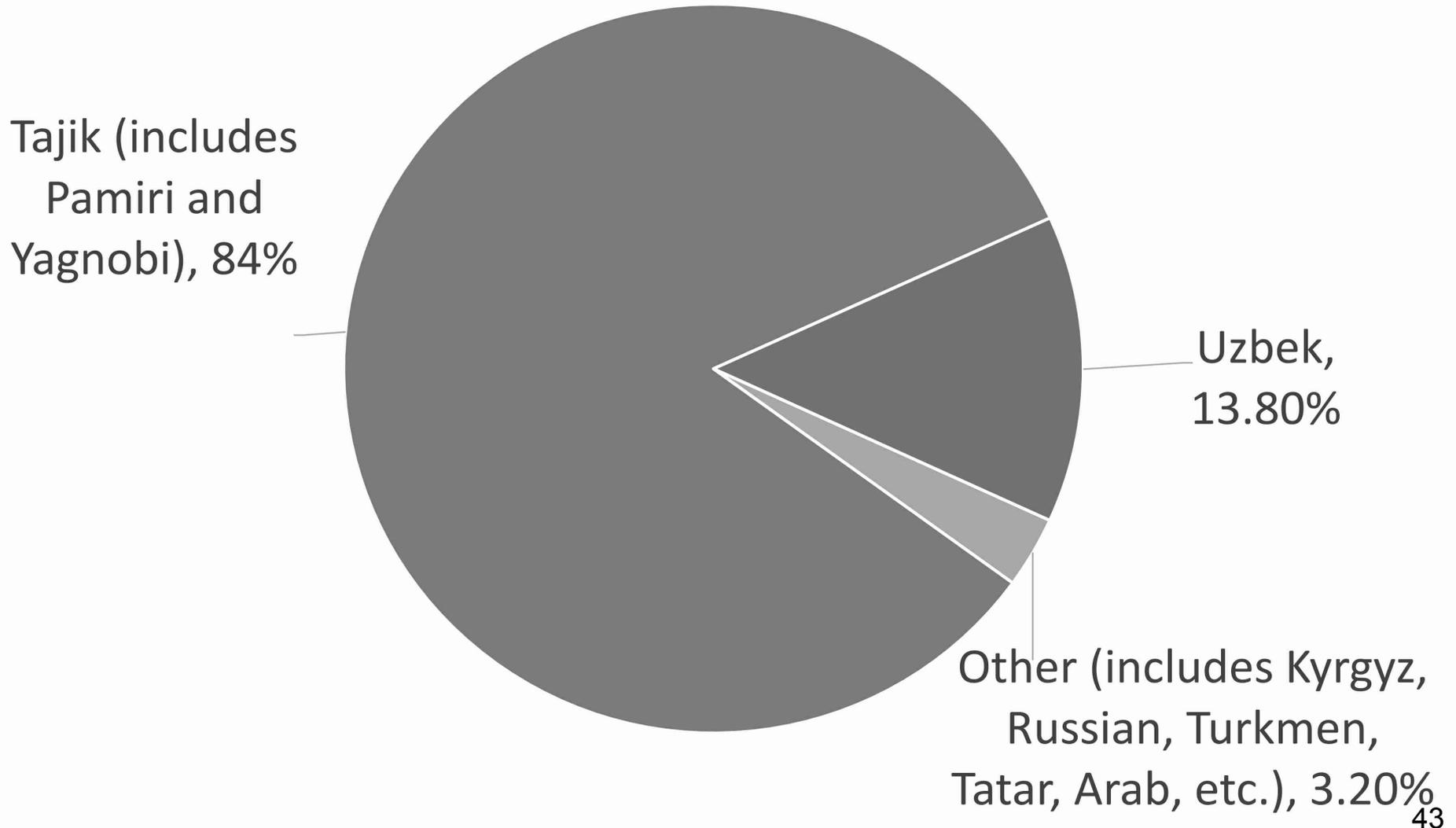


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Tajikistan

- Capital: Dushanbe
- Population 7.1 million
- Major languages: Tajik, Uzbek, Russian
- Major religion: Islam
- Poverty, instability
- Heavily dependent on Russia for economy and security assistance (Islamic extremism), but growing connection to China
- President Emomali Rakhmon since 1994, firm grip, unfair elections
- Concerns about national security, counter-terrorism and public order dominate the political agenda.

Ethnic Groups in Tajikistan



Tajikistan

Human Rights Concerns in RAIO Cases:

- Anti-government political claims
- Religion: Converts from Islam to Christianity, Baptists, Jehovah's Witness, and Mormonism
- Ethnic claims: ethnic-Uzbeks

Tajikistan: Targeting Dissent

- Continued crackdown on political dissent
- Activists, journalists, social media users given lengthy prison sentences
- Lawyers who take up politically sensitive cases, especially related to national security and counter-terrorism, face harassment, intimidation, ill-treatment, arbitrary arrest and prosecutions on politically motivated charges
- NGOs intimidated and restricted; NGO law (register and identify foreign funding)
- Trumped up criminal charges to punish criticism (extremism)

Tajikistan: Targeting Dissent

- Internet heavily censored; sites blocked incl. YouTube, Facebook, RFE/RL (*Radio Ozodi*), Asia-Plus
- Cut access to mobile and messaging services when critical statements about the president, his family, or the government appear online
- Banned opposition party Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) and political opposition movement Group 24
- Targeting activists abroad and their relatives in Tajikistan: listing on Interpol, forced returns for prosecution (Russia, Belarus, Turkey, EU), foreign disappearances, murders
- Torture to obtain confessions and in prison

Tajikistan: Religion



Tajikistan: Religion

- DOS: Country of Particular Concern (“CPC”) - severe violations of religious freedom
- Special legal status of Sunni Hanafi school; women prohibited at mosques
- Government registration/reporting requirements, surveillance, raids, forced closures
- State National Security Services (SNSS) detentions, beatings; Imprisonment for spreading Salafist ideas, membership in extremist organizations, Muslim Brotherhood
- Hijabs, beards, “nontraditional or alien” clothing; roadblocks, forced barber visits

Tajikistan: Religion

Converts from Islam to Christianity

- Christians about 1.5%
- Jehovah's Witnesses illegal since 2009
- Converts hide their faith
- Pressure/violence from families, friends, local community, religious leaders to force return to Islam

Tajikistan: Ethnic-Uzbeks

- Uzbeks ~20%
- Tajik nationalism and lack of linguistic plurality
- Discrimination in government appointments, employment and business opportunities, academic admissions, often on the basis of inadequate knowledge of the Tajik language
- Online hatespeech
- 2013 Uzbek leader who criticized the government's policies towards ethnic minorities targeted, killed (Salim Shamsiddinov)
- Can be associated with Islamic extremism: Most Hizb-ut-Tahrir members come from Uzbek communities

Uzbekistan





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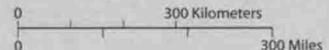
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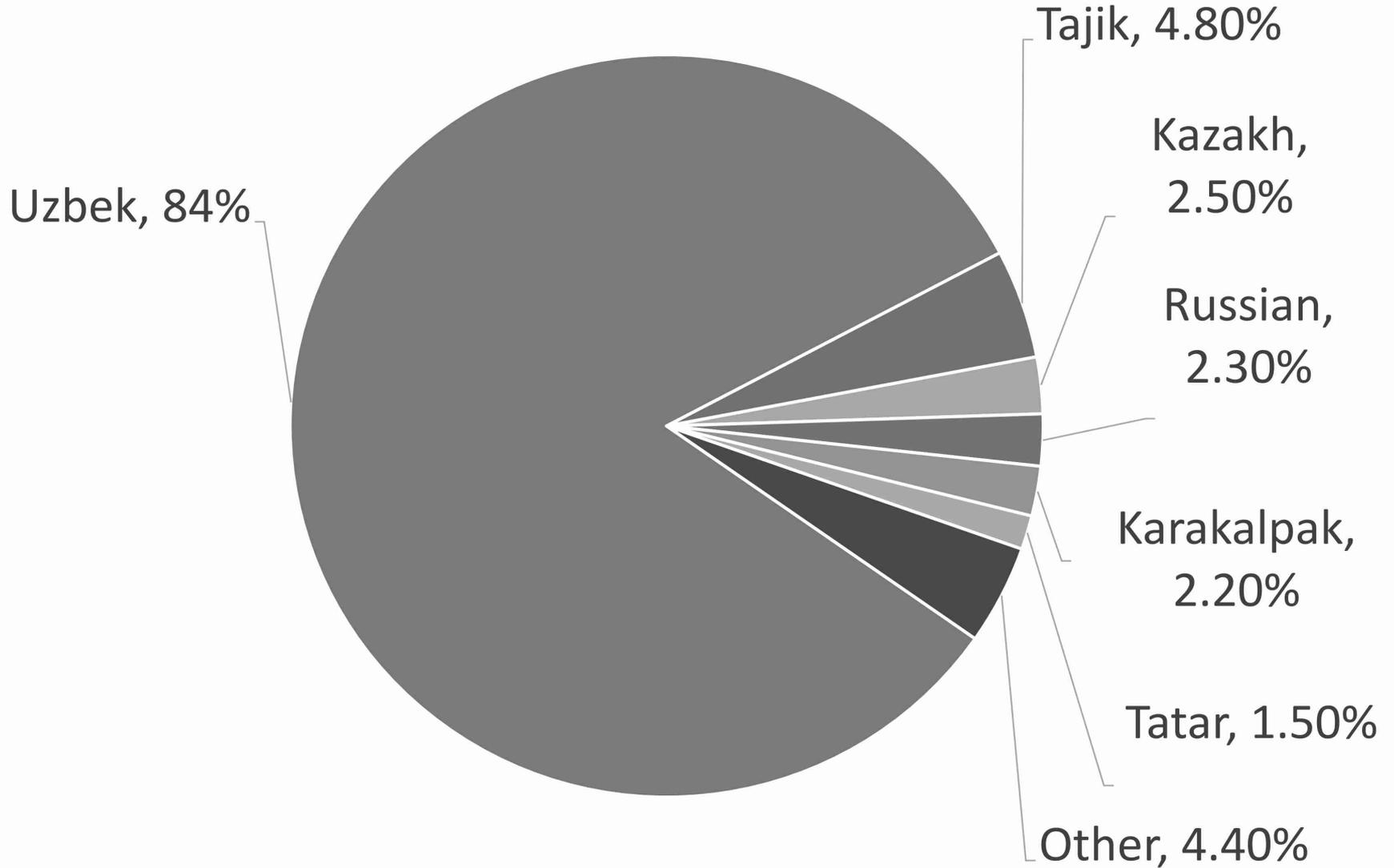


Boundary representation is
not necessarily authoritative.

Uzbekistan

- Capital: Tashkent
- Population: ~28.1 million
- Major languages: Uzbek, Russian, Tajik
- Major religion: Islam
- Most populous Central Asian country and has the largest armed forces
- Political system is highly authoritarian, no true opposition, media tightly controlled
- Human rights record severe but some improvement under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev (2016)
- One of the world's biggest producers of cotton and rich in natural resources, including oil, gas, and gold

Ethnic Groups in Uzbekistan



Uzbekistan

Human Rights Concerns in RAIO Cases:

- Political Dissent
- Religion: Christianity
- Organized Crime
- Domestic Violence

Uzbekistan: Targeting Dissent

Improvements since 2016 under Mirziyoyev?

- Jaslyk prison closed (torture); some political prisoners released, including rights activists, journalists, and opposition activists
- Ban on some key websites lifted (YouTube, Facebook, Eurasianet, Fergana News, Human Rights Watch, BBC's Uzbek service, Voice of America) but Uzbek RFE/RL (*Ozodlik*) still inoperable
- Some relaxing of restrictions on NGOs, but still controlled and some refusals to register
- Removed over 20,000 citizens from security services' "blacklists" of those suspected of extremism

Uzbekistan: Targeting Dissent

- Security services wield enormous power
- Treason (article 157) and other charges used to detain “enemies of the state” with closed trials
- Police, State Security Service (SGB), prison guards and prisoners continued to use torture and other ill-treatment to obtain confessions or punish (physical abuse, sexual violence, mock executions, sleep deprivation)
- Blogger was forcibly confined to a psychiatric hospital for months for reporting on a demonstration
- Human rights defenders and journalists, including those released from prison since 2017, and their families, continue to be under close surveillance and face intimidation, threats and arbitrary detention by police and the SGB

Uzbekistan: Targeting Dissent

March 2020 SGB campaign of phishing and spyware attacks targeting activists and journalists (*but see* “Sandcat”). Capabilities include:

Extract device information (configuration, IMEI, phone number, history of Wi-Fi networks, etc.)	Monitor chat applications, including VKontakte, WhatsApp, Viber, Facebook, IMO, TamTam, Telegram
Record phone calls	Monitor phone calls and text messages
Record audio and video from the embedded microphone and cameras	Take screenshots
Monitor the clipboard	Monitor the geographical location of the device
Extract the browser history	Receive commands by text messages

Uzbekistan: Religion



Uzbekistan: Religion

- ~3.5% Russian Orthodox; 3% other Christians and non-Islam
- Unregistered religious activity illegal (up to five years in prison or a fine); refusal to register
- Literature: Official approval of the content, production, distribution, and storage required (“Bible application” required to purchase a government-authorized version)
- Proselytism, missionary activities illegal (up to 3 years in prison); Private teaching of religious principles illegal; Religious instruction limited to officially sanctioned religious schools and state-approved instructors
- Covert and open surveillance of all religious communities by the SGB secret police

Uzbekistan: Religion

- Police raid unregistered religious group meetings, detain participating individuals, conduct legal and illegal searches, and seize outlawed religious materials from private residences
- Ministry of Education issued dress code prohibiting religious garments and symbols (skullcaps, crosses, and hijabs) in schools
- Converts to Christianity suffer harassment and discrimination, including government pressure on convert and family, and community targeting (burials)
- Bloggers discussing religious ideas detained

Uzbekistan: Organized Crime

- Soviet-era “Thieves-in-Law” growing in power under President Mirziyoyev
- April 2019, Akhtam Yakubov “Samarkandsky” crowned second thief-in-law in Uzbekistan
 - Bakhti Qudratullaev “Tashkentsky” is the other thief-in-law



Uzbekistan: Domestic Violence

- Widespread, with little recourse for victims
- No legislation specifically outlawing domestic violence
- Emphasis on having families resolve issues themselves
- March 27, 2020, NeMolchi (Don't Keep Silent), ordered to take down a story about domestic abuse
- Until 2017, women needed husband or parental permission to leave the country
- First domestic abuse hotline and women's shelters opened in 2018, but understaffed

Uzbekistan Forced Labor



Resources

RAIO Research Unit ECN Country Pages:

[Kazakhstan](#) [Tajikistan](#)

[Kyrgyzstan](#) [Uzbekistan](#)

[Forum18.org](#): Religious freedom in the region

[U.S. Department of State International Religious Freedom Reports](#)

[Minority Rights Group International](#)

[Human Rights Watch](#)

[Amnesty International](#)

[Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty](#)

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